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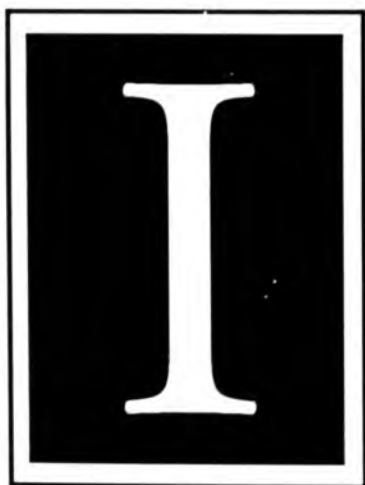
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The Next Country Song You Hear



BY SUSAN ROSSBACH



*I*t was just a fling, and when Larry finds out, you remind him of that repeatedly.

Your best friend Shirley tells you: "It was just a fling, but mark my words, he'll still want you to crawl, just as if it had been a real love affair." Shirley has had exactly five flings, one for each year of her marriage. "Whatever you do," she says, "don't crawl. Remain standing."

So you don't crawl. You get ready for work instead. Larry asks you to leave him the 'good' car and take the older one to work. You slam the 'good' keys on the table and walk out the door.

When you walk back in, approximately eight hours and forty-five minutes later, you find a note explaining that he has taken off work and taken the baby and gone to Houston to stay with his parents. He writes that he doesn't know how long he will be gone.

You are so surprised that, for the first time since 1977, you forget it's Oscar night, your very favorite night of the year to watch TV.

You forget to watch TV at all. You get falling-down drunk on white Zinfandel and decide to give Larry a call.

You put Patsy Cline on the CD player. As you dial, you sip your wine from a 7-Eleven Big Gulp cup. You made a mess of opening the bottle, so you are also swallowing pieces of crumbled cork.

Larry answers the phone at his parents' house. He is sitting in their kitchen playing Scrabble with his younger sister Becky and her husband Earl.

"What do you want?" he says to you.

Your jaw literally drops, just like in soap operas. You can't believe that they would even consider playing Scrabble without you. When you called, you were sorry for what you had done. Now, as you listen to the click of the Scrabble tiles, you start to think that perhaps you haven't done enough. You are not sorry anymore. This evens up the score. Actually, you figure that you need to go out and do more to equal this betrayal. This, what Larry and Becky and Earl are doing, is not your usual garden-variety betrayal, not like being unfaithful.

"It was just a fling," you say to Larry.

"So you've said." His voice is tight.

You start to sob and tell Larry that you're lost and alone. You and Patsy

Cline are practically doing a duet. You tell Larry that you want him and the baby to come back first thing tomorrow morning. Your reasoning is that if he comes home, he can't participate in any more Scrabble games without you.

Larry is extremely cool. Glacial, even. His words hit your ear like needles of ice. Larry tells you that he'll be back in two or three days. Don't worry about the baby, he says, she's fine. You realize you'd forgotten all about the baby. Larry then says, after the briefest pause, that he's glad you called. He says goodbye.

At first, you think he's still on the line waiting for you to say your goodbye, although you have steadfastly promised yourself that you will not give him this courtesy. Then you hear Becky's voice asking a question and Larry's voice replying and the snap of tiles against the game board. You realize that Larry hasn't put the phone back properly and you are still connected.

You refill your Big Gulp cup with more wine and cork. Instead of hanging up, you suddenly begin to scream and rage into the phone for Larry to hang the phone up right, goddamnit. "I'm still here!" you shriek over and over. "I hear you! You're still playing Scrabble! Earl just made FACADE on a double word!"

Tears roll down your face and you scream into the receiver until your voice is hoarse and you feel as if your throat has been ripped by a giant with long and dirty fingernails. This goes on for maybe...an hour? Hell, you don't know.

You are sobbing so loudly, you almost don't hear a chair scoot and Becky saying: "...something to drink. How 'bout you guys?" Then there is an exclamation of annoyance, and the line goes dead.

You are lying flat on your back on the dining room floor. You pull the phone off of the table because you can't stand up well enough to put the

receiver back the regular way. You don't know how long you were on the line, but you think it was hours, and you worry about the phone bill for a few moments before you make another phone call.

By the time Larry and the baby get home nearly three days later, you've been with the other guy, the fling guy, twice more, once on your own living room carpet, with the Patsy Cline CD playing. You tell the other guy you've always wished you could sing like Patsy. He brushes your hair back from your face and looks into your eyes and tells you in a tender voice that you do sing like Patsy.

By the time the phone bill arrives, you are living with the other guy and you don't get to see the amount of the call to Larry in Houston. You don't get to play Scrabble, either. It seems as if you have moved in with someone who thinks it's a stupid, pointless game. And he hates your Patsy Cline CD, too. He tells you that her voice could peel the paint right off the wall.

At night, you dream about having a whole handful of Scrabble letters and nowhere to put them, no matter how you arrange and rearrange. This is a recurring dream. After you wake up, the clicking of the tiles stays and stays in your mind. You wonder if it's the sound of falling apart. You wonder if maybe it's the sound of regret.

You also wonder endlessly how many games of Scrabble Larry and his family have played without you by now. You try to calculate, but your mind boggles. Here's what else you wonder about: you wonder why people always say the mind boggles. Why not the heart boggles? In this case, you think, in your case, it's definitely got to be the heart. ■